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Multiagency practice and professional identity

Anna Souhami

Introduction

Over the last two decades multi-agency practice has become central to children and young people services. Work across professional boundaries is now seen as vital to tackling complex, cross-cutting social problems of child welfare (for example, Frost 2005, Wong et al 2014, Roets et al 2016). Reflecting this, governments across the UK have made the enhancement of integrated services a key policy priority (for example, Department for Education and Skills 2003, Department of Scottish Government 2009, Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015).

Research across children's services has shown that collaboration can be experienced by practitioners as creative and exciting, with clear benefits in enhancing communication and understanding between agencies (Frost 2005, Moran et al 2007, Souhami 2007). However, research has also consistently identified barriers to its success. In particular, threats to the professional identity of multiagency practitioners can undermine collaboration (for example Rose 2011, Messinger 2013). This chapter explores the problem of professional identity in multiagency practice. Why is professional identity at issue in multiagency practice? How is it manifested in practitioners' working lives? What challenges does it create for practitioners? And why are the effects on practitioners so profound?

To explore these questions, the chapter will draw on a detailed case study of the development of a multi-agency Youth Offending Team (YOT) in the English and Welsh youth justice system (Souhami 2007). English and Welsh youth justice offers a particularly useful insight into the challenges of multi-agency practice, as it is in this arena of children and young people's services that it is currently most extensive and most deeply entrenched.

Under the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), the then New Labour government (1997-2010) set in train a radical restructuring of youth justice services which made the entire delivery and

management of youth justice services a multiagency responsibility. Specialist teams of social workers in 'youth justice' or 'juvenile justice' teams were replaced by new, multiagency YOTs. YOTs now deliver the bulk of youth justice services for all young people aged 10-17. They are stand-alone organisations: they do not belong to any agency but draw together practitioners from all the core agencies working with young offenders – social work, probation, police, education and health authorities, as well as staff from other relevant agencies or organisations - who are seconded to or employed by the YOT through the local authority. YOT managers can be appointed from any of the core partner agencies and YOTs are managed locally by multiagency management boards and chief executives' departments. Nationally, YOTs are accountable to the Youth Justice Board (YJB), itself a standalone, non-departmental public body (NDPB) which draws together oversight of the youth justice system across government departments (see Souhami 2015).

Given the volatility of the policy field (Souhami 2013) it is of course difficult to be certain that multi-agency YOTs are a permanently embedded in the youth justice landscape. At the time of writing however, they have become a taken for granted feature of English and Welsh youth justice and are widely regarded as one of the primary successes of Labour's reforms (Taylor 2016). In this context, it may be forgotten that their establishment was profoundly disruptive. Traditional ways of working with young people were brought to an abrupt end; staff from agencies who may have had little previous history of collaboration were drawn together into a new, shared organisation with no established culture or identity; and the development of new, multiagency roles and practice required practitioners to address openly the nature and purpose of their work. It was therefore a moment at which problems of identity in multiagency practice became explicit, and were of paramount importance to the success of the new youth justice.

Terminology

First, a note about terminology. There are many different forms of multi-agency practice, differing in their extent of integration. Frost (2005, p13) has described forms of partnership work as a continuum, ranging from co-operation, where services maintain their independence, to collaboration (with joint decision making and planning), through to developing new forms of shared working in structures that transcend professional boundaries, such as the YOTs described here. The term 'integrated services' or 'inter-

professional work' is often used as an all-encompassing term in children's services. In the context of youth justice the term 'multiagency' is most frequently used, and reflecting that, is the term I use here.

Understanding multiagency practice in youth justice

While multi-agency practice is becoming the default strategy across children and young people's services, it is in fact underpinned by relatively new ways of thinking about work with children and families which reflect a particular social and economic environment. This is particularly clear in relation to youth justice, where multi-agency practice marks a clear departure from previous ways of thinking about youth crime and its management.

Since the mid-1980s both practitioners and policy makers have espoused the importance of a 'joined-up' approach to preventing youth crime, and local partnership work started to proliferate across youth justice services (Nacro 1987, Audit Commission 1996). However, broader policy interest in multiagency practice intensified in the climate of a 'new public management' (Hood, 1991) in social services, which prioritised market-based, managerialist principles of efficiency and effectiveness.

Reflecting this, the primary aims of the youth justice system moved away from its previous, transformative goals, such as the rehabilitation or treatment of the young person, towards managing the offending population as efficiently and economically as possible (for example, Feeley and Simon, 1992). This mode of youth justice resulted in two new strategies. Firstly, it was recognised that it is more effective – and cheaper – to tackle offending behaviour at an early stage (Audit Commission 1996). At the same time, an emerging 'what works' agenda suggested that, if targeted appropriately, some forms of intervention could be successful in reducing offending behaviour for some young people (Muncie, 2009). The youth justice system therefore became more active and more interventionist. This approach marked a sharp change in direction from the previous orthodoxy in youth justice practice. Research suggested that at best, criminal justice interventions had little impact on offending behaviour (Martinson, 1974); at worst they could establish delinquent identities

and reinforce patterns of offending behaviour, thereby doing more harm than good (for example, Goldson, 2000). As a result, it was widely held that contact with criminal justice agencies should be avoided or minimised wherever possible. By contrast, under New Labour's reforms agencies were now seen to have a moral imperative to intervene as soon as possible: not to do so was seen as allowing young people 'to go on wrecking their own lives' (Home Office 1997, para 2.1)

Secondly, attention focused on improving inter-agency co-operation. A wealth of research evidence had shown that offending behaviour was a multifaceted phenomenon with multiple causes and effects. In other words, young people who offend often experience a range of connected problems, including family, schooling, health or social needs (e.g. McAra and McVie 2010, 2016). Consequently, it was recognised that offending behaviour could not effectively be addressed by any single agency, but required input from a range of practitioners. It therefore became a priority to consolidate the diverse expertise and resources of staff from different agencies into a seamless, multi-agency service (Audit Commission 1996).

The drive towards improving inter-agency cooperation in youth justice practice also marks an important conceptual departure in thinking about youth offending. The removal of youth offending from mainstream social services indicated that offending was no longer seen simply as one of a range of social problems. Instead, the identification of offending as the organising focus of intervention had both practical and symbolic significance: the 'child in need' now was foremost a 'youth offender' (Goldson 2000).

The result of the change in thinking about youth offending resulted in a new approach to its management: one which was economically effective and efficient, which was active and interventionist, allowed for early identification and targeting of young people at risk of offending, and involved of a range of agencies. In this context, the perceived benefits of multiagency work made it a highly attractive strategy.

The benefits of multiagency practice

Multi-agency practice is seen to have three key benefits in work with children and young people.

First, it allows for greater efficiency. By drawing together staff from the different agencies working with young people, partnerships can pool their funding, expertise, effort and information, allowing for a better coordinated use of resources. Further, it is argued that partnerships allow multiagency staff to act as 'brokers' for their home agencies (Burnett, 2005), removing barriers to cooperation, facilitating referrals and providing easier access to information and services.

Second, it enables more effective practice. As they are able to share expertise and information from the diverse services working with young people, multiagency teams can identify the range of needs experienced by their service users and provide a holistic service to address them. Similarly, because they can share information across a range of 'risk factors', multiagency teams are able to identify young people considered at risk of offending and intervene to prevent them from doing so (Taylor, 2016). Moreover, as staff work outside their traditional structures and practices, multiagency practice fosters new ways of working and so encourages flexibility, innovation and creativity, a style of working particularly important to addressing complex social problems like offending (Hood 2014).

Finally, multiagency work aims to produce a consistent and coherent approach among the diverse agencies that work with young people. By bringing together diverse professional groups into a collective whole, multiagency collaboration aims to encourage the emergence of shared approach to practice with young people (for example, Home Office 1997). In other words, multiagency work is concerned not just with organisational change, but with cultural change too. It aims to consolidate differences in the purpose, values and principles of practice among diverse agencies and to promote a shared understanding. Of course, this is also consistent with managerialist principles of economy: by 'designing out' conflict in the aims and values of different agencies, multiagency work aims to remove barriers to cooperation and encourage the smooth and efficient running of the system (e.g. Audit Commission, 1996, Roets et al 2016, Wong et al 2014).

Professional identity and multiagency practice

The understanding of these benefits of multi-agency work is underpinned by two, contradictory ideas about professional identity. First, it is assumed that staff will retain core elements of their professional identity: they will bring to multiagency work the specialist skills, expertise and experience derived from their home agency. But second, it is assumed that staff will to some extent be able to put this identity aside, allowing them to develop of a shared and mutually acceptable approach with practitioners from other agencies.

Multiagency work therefore creates an inevitable challenge to practitioners' identity. To what extent can and should practitioners retain a distinctive professional identity? Does a new, multi-agency identity emerge – and how is this identity shaped?

The following pages explore these challenges through the lived experiences of practitioners in the Midlands YOT. It examines three core dilemmas in multiagency practice in which problems of professional identity are central: (1) the meaning of professional expertise; (2) power relations between participating agencies; and (3) conflicts in professional cultures.

Researching professional identity

The case study reported here draws on an intensive, 14-month period of ethnographic fieldwork (for further details, see Souhami 2007), following the transition of a Midlands social services team into a multiagency YOT. Close observation of practitioners' working lives is essential to explore questions of professional identity. Identities are grounded in lived experience, emerging in interactions, actions and behaviours and the way these are understood, acted on and managed in practitioners' working lives (for example, Geertz, 1973; Schwartzman, 1993). Problems of identity can therefore only be identified through a deep understanding of the context in which they emerge.

Professional expertise and professional identity

One of the core dilemmas of multiagency practice is the balance between the specialist contribution of professionals from partner agencies, and the development of shared practices. Are staff specialists, bringing particular professional skills to the work of the

team? Or are they generalists whose contribution is 'merged' into the practice of the partnership, with its common responsibilities?

The appropriate balance of specialist and generic aspects of multiagency roles is a central and much debated question (see, for example, Rose 2011). Indeed, it has been argued that one advantage of multiagency practice is that its inherent flexibility allows this balance to be determined according to individual skills and local needs (for example, Home Office et al, 1998). However, the body of both formal and informal knowledge and experience that is unique to each profession is strongly connected to identity (see also Moran et al 2007, Rose 2011, Messinger 2013). As experiences in the Midlands YOT suggest, practitioners' specialist contributions are not only undermined by the development of generic practice, but by the challenges of developing a specialist role as well. As a result both these elements of multi-agency roles put at risk professionals' sense of identity.

Importing professional expertise

Even where staff have a distinct set of professional skills and experience to contribute to a multiagency service, they may find these are not always easily transposed to a multiagency environment. Instead, the new context may demand critical changes in individual approaches to work. For example, guidance for the development of the roles of new YOT members suggested that the responsibilities of probation officers should be very similar to their accustomed role, supervising community sentences, assessing and managing the risk of re-offending and providing support services for young people on bail (Home Office et al, 1998: para 83). However, probation staff in the Midlands YOT explained that while their new tasks appeared similar to their regular work with adult offenders, they found young people to be 'totally different clients' who required a fundamental change in the focus and scope of professional practice. As one probation officer put it, "probation is getting more and more to do with enforcement, specifically looking at offending behaviour and ways of changing that", yet working with children and young people involves a different understanding of offending behaviour, which prioritises a wider range of issues in young people's lives. He explained, "They [YOT workers] focus on other things. Offending behaviour is possibly not even on the list". How, then, could his professional expertise be applied in the multiagency context?

Consequently, staff joining a multiagency team may be confronted with the realisation that, as Gilling puts it, 'agencies effectively speak different languages: they have different cognitive frameworks, different assumptive worlds, and different discourses' (1994: 250). This can have a profound impact on practitioners' ability to put their skills into practice. As the probation officer put it, "I've come from a setting where it's very clear what your role is and what you should be doing ... but [here] I haven't got a clue".

Developing new expertise

As staff are brought together to address shared problems and objectives, they are required to some extent to put aside their usual roles and to engage in shared ways of working and thinking (Crawford, 1997, Rose 2011). Multiagency staff are likely to be required to take on new tasks and ways of thinking that blur professional boundaries and distance them from their established sense of professional expertise. In the case of YOTs for example, the development of 'generic' work was seen as a central strand of youth justice practice. The initial guidance which set out the roles for YOT staff stated that all practitioners should 'expect to work flexibly': 'in principle', any team member could undertake any function in the team (Home Office et al, 1998; para 80; for more recent guidance see e.g. Sandwell 2014 which confirms that YOT police officers may carry a caseload). Thus, in the Midlands YOT, multiagency staff took responsibility for work that had been a core part of the former social work team, such as supervising offenders, writing pre-sentence reports (PSRs), attending court and taking part in assessments and reviews of young people's progress.

The chance to transcend usual agency roles can be an important attraction of multiagency work. For example, an education officer said: "I was used to my old job, just thinking I was brilliant at it. It's good to take yourself out of that environment, it's better for me, definitely better for my development". The opportunity to become involved in shared tasks also appeared to be crucial for practitioners' feelings of inclusion within the team. For example, staff were initially unsure about how to involve police officers in the generic work of the Midlands YOT. As officers are prevented by law from acting as appropriate adults, was it appropriate for them to supervise casework or write court reports? However, the eventual decision to exclude them from these core duties had a significant impact on how police officers saw their integration in the team. They described feeling marginalised, "snubbed" and "fobbed off".

However, the development of shared practice raises a number of further problems.

Maintaining a balance

First, the pressures of multiagency work may mean that an appropriate balance is difficult to determine or maintain. In particular, where teams experience high workloads, specialist staff can feel under pressure to take on tasks outside their areas of expertise (Youth Justice Board, 2004). In the Midlands YOT, for example, education and health staff felt that they were being asked to spend less time on specialist interventions and more on generic 'social work' tasks such as casework or writing PSRs. This can lead to an erosion of the specialist contribution of staff which is integral to professional identity. As the health officer put it, "it detracts from what I'm here for, doesn't it? If I'd wanted to be a social worker on the YOT, I would have trained as one, wouldn't I?".

Expertise or inexperience?

Second, the development of generic practice calls into question the expertise of experienced staff. For example, while specialist staff in the Midlands YOT had extensive experience in their home agencies, it did not inevitably follow that they were equipped to be a case worker or write PSRs. In other words, given the shifts in focus and practice in a multiagency context, how do professional experience and professional qualifications apply? The emphasis on generic work in the Midlands YOT led staff from partner agencies to feel inexperienced and unprepared to undertake the work now required of them. An education officer said: "I've done no risk work, I've done no offence analysis work, but suddenly I'm looking at offence analysis and risk assessment. I don't think I should be doing that at all". As she explained, this made for an unhappy working life: "I feel totally out of my depth, and unsupported on a few of my cases, who've got real, social work needs ... I'm just sort of trying my best". Moreover, her lack of experience had serious implications for service users: "I've just done a PSR on my own ... I don't think it's right that I should be doing it ... it's a very grave thing ... it's somebody's justice, it's somebody's liberty".

The importance of expert practice

The development of multiagency practice may therefore have a profound impact on practitioners' sense of their skills and unique professional contribution, and thus their professional identity. In the Midlands YOT, the sense that their professional experience and expertise had become redundant led practitioners to feel devalued and undermined. As the

health officer put it, “I feel like the new girl ... if a session went badly you can feel like a piece of s***, is it me?”. Moreover, by replacing their specialist input with what were seen as core social work tasks, practitioners felt they were becoming assimilated into another profession: as the health officer put it, they were “becoming social workers”.

Experiences in the Midlands YOT therefore suggest that it is the regular use of professional skills and expertise which is crucial to retain a sense of identity. Simply laying claim to their profession’s body of knowledge and skills – or the profession’s ‘functional territory’ (Huntington, 1981) – is not enough to ensure practitioners’ sense of occupational belonging. Instead, practitioners need to be able to put these into practice. Furthermore, by taking on tasks that are seen to ‘belong’ to another agency, practitioners may feel they are not only losing their professional identity but replacing it with that of a different profession. This can be a cause of acute resentment. As the education officer in the Midlands YOT explained, “I didn’t want to be a social worker. Do you know what I mean? I could have gone and done the DipSW [social work qualification, Diploma in Social Work] just as easily as everybody else.... I didn’t want to do it”.

Power and professional identity

However, while practitioners’ sense of professional identity is closely connected with their ability to employ their professional expertise and skills, their ability to do so is dependent on power relations between participating agencies.

Power has long been seen as a central issue in multiagency work (for example, Sampson et al, 1988; Pearson et al, 1992; Crawford, 1997; Gilling, 1994; Crawford and Jones, 1995, Rose 2011, Messinger 2013). Intrinsic, structural differences between agencies, such as their access to resources and status, result in important power differentials which can have a profound impact on the shape of multiagency practice and the identities of those involved.

Power and definition

One of the most important manifestations of power relations in multiagency work is the extent to which agencies are able to influence the aims and activities of the partnership. The more powerful agencies set the agenda, dominate decision making and may even pull out of

partnerships to suit their own interests (see, for example, Pearson et al, 1992; Crawford and Jones, 1995, Ambrose-Miller 2016). More particularly, power relations are manifested by agencies' relative power to define what a partnership does: its objectives, the nature of the problems to be addressed, or the courses of action considered legitimate (Crawford and Jones, 1995). As there is considerable elasticity in the definition of the aims and scope of multiagency practice, there is significant scope for the exercise of power. Given the traditional status of the police service, for example, multiagency work in criminal justice has previously been described as a 'police takeover', whereby the police co-opt other agencies into pursuing police goals (Sampson et al, 1988). However, power differentials between agencies can fluctuate according to context. In the early stages of the development of YOTs, youth justice was dominated by social work, despite it traditionally being seen in criminal justice as a profession with relatively low status (see, for example, Thomas, 1986).

The experiences of staff in the Midlands YOT illustrate how questions of professional identity are connected to the individual agencies' power to define. Many of the challenges outlined above arose from the difficulty of using specialist skills in the multiagency context, and the adoption of core 'social work' duties as shared, generic practice. In other words, multiagency practitioners' contributions were understood solely in terms of how they support social casework, whether by staff supplying specialist support or becoming caseworkers themselves. However, this was not the only available definition of multiagency roles. The official guidance (Home Office et al, 1998) explicitly encourages a rather different conception of multiagency roles. For example, it states that specialist input should be defined according to the talents of individual staff, and roles developed 'in the light of [practitioners'] personal skills and experience, not solely because of their professional background' (Home Office et al, 1998: para 80). Thus, while the education officer expected that part of her work would involve assisting social workers, she had also anticipated providing different kinds of educational support: "there's a desperate need for prevention in schools across the city, and that's what I want to be doing ... I thought that I'd be doing group work within schools ... perhaps piloting a preventative project". This kind of preventative work would have supported the emphasis on early intervention following the Crime and Disorder Act, thereby forming an important part of the team's work. Moreover, it would have enabled the education officer to use her specialist skills in a way suited to the context, so helping maintain her sense of professional expertise and identity. However, the underlying power relationships in the team – and in particular the dominance of social

workers' perspectives – excluded any other conception of multiagency roles. As one social worker acknowledged, "I'm quite aware I'm talking from my perspective all the time, you see, about how they can help me do my job, not the other way round".

Professional cultures and professional identity

However, while multiagency practice may risk undermining professional identities, the extent to which distinctive professional identities are retained in a multiagency team may in turn risk undermining its success.

Professional identity is closely connected to occupational culture: the values and principles deriving from professional practice which shape the way professionals think about their work and their own identity as practitioners (Martin 2002, Messinger 2013). Multiagency staff therefore bring with them not just the expertise of their home agency, but their connected cultural values. Indeed, as outlined above, a key strand of the rationale for multiagency practice is that collaboration will erode cultural as well as practical obstacles to cooperation.

However, as a result, multiagency practice inevitably creates the capacity for conflict. Given their different traditions, cultures and working assumptions, staff are likely to have different conceptions of problems and appropriate solutions (Crawford and Jones, 1995). As a social worker in the Midlands YOT put it, newly arrived practitioners from different agencies had "other agendas, different ways of thinking, different rules, different values". For example, in the field of youth justice, conflict is often anticipated between social workers and police staff who are considered to represent opposing interests within the criminal justice process, namely the traditional 'justice' approach of the criminal justice agencies, and the 'welfare' objectives of health and education authorities (see, for example, Thomas, 1986; Crawford, 1997). Indeed, the formation of multiagency YOTs was meant to resolve this problematic relationship (Labour Party, 1997). Social workers in the Midlands YOT certainly thought the two agencies were incompatible. In contrast to the 'welfarist' approach of social work, the police were seen to have a punitive 'cop culture' geared towards 'criminalising', 'nicking' or 'setting up' young people. As one social worker said, "the police have always seen social

workers as [being] in league with the service user. Social workers have always seen the police as bastards who are locking them up”.

In this way, multiagency practice requires an engagement with the working styles and cultures of collaborating agencies. Rather than straightforwardly produce consistency, the formation of multiagency partnerships may expose inter-agency tensions which can undermine collaboration. However, it also reveals a number of more complex problems about occupational identity.

Occupational cultures may rarely be examined within the boundaries of a profession: instead, shared approaches may be assumed. However, multiagency partnerships bring these hidden questions of culture into the open. In so doing, it puts at issue practitioners’ relationships with the shared culture of their profession.

Unrepresentative representatives?

First, as multiagency work separates staff from their home agencies, it is more likely to appeal to those who feel some sense of detachment from their work and colleagues, particularly when the work of the multiagency team is felt to conflict with important aspects of the organisational life of parent agencies.

For example, in the context of ‘old-fashioned machismo’ (Reiner, 2010, p128) in the police service, interagency work is often regarded pejoratively as ‘pink and fluffy’, or as ‘social work’ (Crawford and Jones, 1995; Foster et al, 2005). Moreover, police staff joining interagency teams such as YOTs may be required to take on work that was formerly ‘owned’ by social workers, and therefore regarded as welfarist in approach and differently gendered. For these reasons, police staff who take up YOT positions are particularly likely to feel some sense of disconnection the police service. In the Midlands YOT, the two (male) police staff said they felt uncomfortable and out of place in the police service and that this was integral to their move to the YOT. One explained, “I have nothing in common with young policemen. They’re different animals ... I don’t get on well with police officers generally”.

Consequently, it is a paradox of multiagency work that collaborating staff are likely to be unrepresentative of their parent agencies. As Crawford and Jones (1995) argue, in practice this can boost relationships within the partnership: where conflict is anticipated, relations may be smoothed by staff who appear somehow atypical of their respective agencies. As a social worker on the Midlands YOT said, “we’re very lucky with the police officer we’ve got. He’s thoughtful, more intelligent than most”

Professional cultures or professional confusion?

Second, multiagency practice puts at question whether professionals from different agencies really have a distinct identity at all. The blurring of occupational boundaries through shared practice can reveal not only conflicts in agency approaches, but the similarities and confusion within and between them as well.

For example, the first new, multiagency programme developed in the Midlands YOT was the establishment of group work with young offenders. In setting up the groups, staff had to consider whether attendance should be compulsory, and, if so, whether young people should be returned to court (‘breached’) if they did not come. Underlying these apparently procedural issues were core questions about the values and purpose of work with young people. Were young people responsible for their offending? Should the team punish young people, or try to help them? And what did this mean? Consequently, practitioners found themselves debating the fundamental purpose and values of work with young offenders. But, as a result, it became clear that no agency had a clear position on these issues. Instead, there was wide disagreement and confusion among staff from all agencies. As the education officer said, “we all disagreed on what we should do.... There’s a lot of different philosophies out there about what the team is, punitive approaches, and welfare approaches”. Moreover, the confusion in practitioners’ own views became apparent, as the education officer described: “I mean I’m very welfare based ... I *thought* I was very welfare ... but I think they have to comply. I know that if it was one of my young people on the group and I had to breach them I would hate it, but I think we have to do it”.

More generally, the erosion of agency boundaries removes one of the most important ways in which professionals get a sense of their own professional identity. The sense of a clear division between agencies is a very useful clarification strategy: it allows practitioners to

define their own identity in opposition to other professions. As Parker puts it, claims of “‘us’ and ‘them’” are an essential way of describing ‘we’ (2000, p5). In other words, these claims of similarity and difference mask the complexity and uncertainty of professional values. They allow professionals within them to lay claim to a distinctive identity by placing them in opposition to those of other agencies. Once these boundaries are eroded, this becomes more difficult.

For example, in the Midlands YOT, staff found they had similarities with practitioners from agencies with whom they were traditionally seen as in conflict, disagreements with practitioners from their home agency, and realised they were uncertain of what constituted the aims and purpose of their work. This experience can be deeply unsettling. In the Midlands YOT, staff felt that the multiagency team had ‘disintegrated’ and that the members were ‘in chaos’.

Conclusion: towards multiagency practice

Problems of professional identity are at the heart of multiagency practice. Its very rationale requires staff both to retain core elements of their professional identity through their specialist skills and expertise, and to put this identity aside, allowing for the development of a shared practice.

The problems created by multiagency practice indicate important elements of professional identity. Firstly, professional expertise is strongly connected to identity. However, the research reported here shows that it is not enough simply to lay claim to a body of expert knowledge: instead, professionals need to be able to put these skills into practice in order to get a sense of their unique contribution. Second, a shared sense of professional values and approach is important to feel a sense of occupational belonging. And third, this element of professional identity is most clearly demonstrated through a contrast with other agencies. It is through these ‘us and them’ claims that professionals are able to describe their own, distinctive shared values and approaches.

Multiagency practice puts all these elements of identity at issue. The erosion of agency boundaries and difficulties of employing distinct, expert skills may expose ambiguities in practitioners' relationships with their parent agencies and confusion over the aims and values of work with young people. Of course, these complexities will always have present in the work of the various collaborating agencies. However, as experiences in the Midlands YOT shows, multiagency practice brings them to the surface.

This calls into question the central assumption of multiagency practice, namely that drawing together staff from diverse agencies will straightforwardly result in a pooling of skills, expertise and approaches, and therefore bring about a 'common approach' to practice (Home Office, 1997). Rather than easily consolidating diverse approaches to practice, multiagency work may instead expose their underlying uncertainties.

However, while experiencing such uncertainties can be uncomfortable, acknowledging them is a crucial basis on which to build a shared, multiagency approach. The central challenge for multiagency teams, therefore, is to acknowledge these issues and provide opportunities for critical and shared reflection, which allow the conflicts and uncertainties within and between agencies to be recognised and addressed (see also Frost 2005, Messinger 2013).

Finally, the issues discussed here raises a further question about the development of multiagency work: to what extent is the development of a shared culture and approach to practice desirable? As this chapter shows, it is important for practitioners to maintain a sense of their distinct professional identities in order to feel an integral parts of a multiagency organisation. Moreover, the benefits of multiagency practice derive from the diversity of multiagency teams. The mix of professional skills, approaches and backgrounds is the key to the emergence of a coherent, holistic and creative approach to practice, and to overcoming traditional barriers to interagency cooperation. In other words, and paradoxically, it appears that a central aspect of a shared, multiagency approach to practice is the acceptance and incorporation of difference.

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